

Forty good years

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BACK in 1965, in New York, my old friend Daniel Bell, then a professor of sociology at Columbia University, and I, then vice-president of the publishing firm Basic Books, were deeply troubled. The source of our discomfort was the mode of thought that was beginning to dominate political and social discourse in and outside of academia—an ideological mode that made nonsense of the existential reality of American life.

One of the most egregious examples of this ideological nonsense, popular among sociologists and dramatized by the press, was the idea that the way for the poor to escape from poverty was to organize to “fight city hall” and “gain power.” This seemed plausible at a time when socialist and quasi-socialist ideas were still very much alive, prompting many to believe that the cure for poverty was political activism (relying upon the state) rather than economic activism (encouraging entrepreneurial energy in markets).

Both Dan and I had come from poor families, had gone through radical phases in our youth, and were appalled to discover that ideas we thought discredited had acquired a new lease on life. Dan, in those days, described himself as a democratic socialist (he still does, incidentally), while I was a somewhat skeptical liberal. We certainly thought there was a role for government in moving people out of poverty—a much larger role than conservatives thought appropriate. But we did not believe that political activism (a.k.a. “the class struggle”) could deliver people from poverty.

Then, there was the scholarly nonsense, promoted by the Ford Foundation and echoed by most of the other major foundations, that "automation" threatened to abolish people's jobs, while at the same time throwing them into a life of affluent leisure for which they were intellectually and morally unprepared. Obviously, these foundations, and the universities and media as well (the media by then being populated by college graduates), had a crucial role to play in rescuing the American people from this ghastly fate. The result was a plethora of conferences on the imminent problem of mass leisure, out of which emerged a plethora of big books.

Dan, who knew more economics than I did, was infuriated by the basic ignorance this episode revealed, an ignorance of how an economic system copes with innovation. I was astounded by the ease with which Marx's description of the idyllic life under socialism had been unwittingly transformed into a nightmare by persons mainly on the Left. President Johnson lent credibility to the issue by appointing a Commission on Automation, which included Dan and a brilliant young M.I.T. economist, Robert Solow. Together they helped write so sobering a report for the Commission that it succeeded in making the topic a deadly bore.

THESE were the kinds of issues that provoked the founding of *The Public Interest*. Financially, it was made possible by a \$10,000 grant from a friend, Warren Manshel, who was promptly designated publisher, with Dan and myself serving as co-editors. The journal's first home (with the benign approval of another friend, the president of Basic Books) was my modest office at Basic Books, and the entire staff consisted of my secretary-assistant Vivian Gornick, a talented young woman who was soon to launch her own career as a feminist and a writer for the *Village Voice*. Dan and I named the magazine, designed it, and printed (as I recall) some 1,200 copies of the first issue. For articles, we simply rang up friends and acquaintances whom we believed to be on our "wave length." The first issue featured articles by Pat Moynihan, Robert Solow, Robert Nisbet, Jacques Barzun, Nathan Glazer, Martin Diamond, and Daniel Bell, among others. The second and third issues introduced such other notable contributors as James Q. Wilson, Earl Raab, Milton

Friedman, and Peter Drucker—not all of them so very notable at the time.

We made one easy editorial decision at the outset: no discussion of foreign policy or foreign affairs. Vietnam was arousing a storm of controversy at the time, and we knew that our group had a wide spectrum of opinion on the issue. We did not want any of the space in our modest-sized quarterly to be swallowed up by Vietnam. The simplest solution was to ban foreign affairs and foreign policy from our pages.

We also made a financial decision: The co-editors would not be paid. Our reasoning, again, was simple. Because the subsidy to the magazine (with the increase of circulation it quickly went up to several tens of thousands of dollars a year) came from the pocket of a friend, we did not want to be in the position of taking his money for ourselves. This principle survived until today, despite significant changes in the magazine's circumstances. Among those changes were the renting of a sliver of office space in a nearby office building, losing Vivian Gornick to the world of journalism, and acquiring a new secretary-assistant, Rita Lazzaro, who spent the next 18 years presiding admirably over our office. In 1987, we made what may have been the most significant change: moving to Washington.

After a few years, the increased recognition the magazine was receiving (alas, barely reflected in its circulation) attracted some conservative foundations. In one of my essays in the *Wall Street Journal*, I had urged such foundations to stop moaning about the welfare state, the "road to serfdom," the death of free enterprise by "statism," and the iniquities of the income tax, and address the realities of the conservative situation. I wrote this not as a "movement conservative" but as someone who thought it would be best for American democracy if conservatives would engage in a serious way the world as it existed—a world that in some respects was prospering, despite those fatal injuries the New Deal had presumably inflicted on it.

I struck a responsive chord. At least a few of those conservative foundations felt the desirability of breaking out of their self-imposed ghettos. First was the Smith Richardson Foundation, which consisted, in its entirety, of Randall Richardson, his secretary, and a large pot of money from his family fortune. Randy became a friend and sup-

porter, and was soon followed by the Olin Foundation, headed for the last two decades by another friend and ally, James Piereson. Finally, there was the newly created Bradley Foundation under former Olin executive Michael Joyce, who became a tower of strength in the years ahead.

FOR the first seven years of its existence, *The Public Interest* was generally regarded (and regarded itself) as a moderately liberal journal. The editors and most of the contributors, after all, were registered Democrats. Pat Moynihan was in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, and in 1968, I was on a Hubert Humphrey campaign task force. It was the election of 1972 that precipitated the first political divisions in our community. Daniel Bell could not bring himself to vote Republican and unenthusiastically endorsed George McGovern. About this time, he also stepped down as co-editor, to be replaced by another old friend—and, as it happened, Democrat—Nathan Glazer. I, on the other hand, repelled by McGovern's views on foreign policy, unenthusiastically endorsed Nixon's reelection. My Republican vote produced little shock waves in the New York intellectual community. It didn't take long—a year or two—for the socialist writer Michael Harrington to come up with the term “neoconservative” to describe a renegade liberal like myself. To the chagrin of some of my friends, I decided to accept that term; there was no point calling myself a liberal when no one else did. And I had to face the fact that voting for Richard Nixon was, in the university world and in the intellectual world generally, the equivalent of a Jew ostentatiously eating pork on Yom Kippur. It was an act of self-excommunication. In fact, some of my critics regarded it as especially heinous for a Jew to abandon the creed of liberalism. For them, neoconservatism was seen as a religious as well as a political heresy.

Some of my best friends and close associates at *The Public Interest* did not join me in that heresy. The magazine continued to shy away from anything resembling partisan politics and concentrated on revisionist social science. This was the original impulse behind the founding of the journal, and it continued to be the major—although never exclusive—focus of our editorial activity. It was, so to speak, the bread-and-butter of our offerings, suggesting new ways of looking at the problems of poverty, economic

inequality, educational equality, sex education, gun control, and so on. We invited and published the findings of social research, however heterodox. We also enriched it with newer modes of economic analysis, thus giving it an additional claim to non-ideological objectivity.

But we were never single-minded economists or social scientists. On the contrary, we soon discovered that behind the hard realities of economics and social science were the equally hard realities of morality, family, culture, and religion—the “habits of the mind” and “habits of the heart,” as Tocqueville said, that determine the quality and character of a people. To the extent to which these factors, too, could be subject to social research and thoughtful social analysis, they gave our articles their distinctive character. In its last decade, the magazine had the good fortune to acquire, first as executive editor and then as the editor, Adam Wolfson, who brought with him a lively interest in and keen appreciation of just such subjects.

IN my case, this mode of thought took the form of what came to be known as neoconservatism. I was then writing a monthly essay for the editorial page of the *Wall Street Journal*, and it was there that neoconservatism could be said to have been reared, if not born. I had no patience with the old conservatism that confronted the tides of history by shouting “Stop!” I could not summon up any admiration for Herbert Hoover or Alf Landon, and I did not regard Franklin D. Roosevelt as the devil incarnate. My political instincts were always inclined to the proactive rather than the reactive, to work with reality, not against it.

To inject some academic substance into my thinking about public policy, I took a sabbatical from New York University in 1976–77 and spent a year at the American Enterprise Institute in Washington, studying economics primarily. It was there that I became disillusioned with conventional macroeconomics and sympathetic to what was called “supply-side” economics—an inelegant title for something I prefer to think of as the “economics of growth.” It led me to publish in *The Public Interest* an article by Jude Wanniski arguing the case for supply-side economics, illustrated for the first time by the “Laffer curve.” The world was not much impressed, but the *Wall Street Journal* was. Its editorial page now had as its editor a young

Robert Bartley, who had already published in the *Journal* an article about our magazine, entitled "Irving Kristol and Friends." It was the *Journal* that went on to publicize supply-side economics, applying it to the issues of the day and creating something like a neoconservative economics. The crucial role of the *Journal* and of this new approach to economics can be seen even today by comparison with the European experience, where economic growth still suffers as the financial press remains captive to traditional "bankers' economics."

In foreign policy, *The Public Interest* continued to be mute. But I and many of our writers could express our views in *Commentary* (which, in turn, gave birth to the Committee for the Free World, headed by the then-retired politician Donald Rumsfeld). *Commentary* was the third of the publications that, along with the *Journal* and *The Public Interest*, constituted what the Russians call a *troika*, a team of three horses pulling a carriage. It is astonishing to think that the combined efforts of these three publications (two with very modest circulations) should have been so consequential—or so it would seem today, to judge by the extraordinary interest displayed throughout the world in neoconservatism.

The culture wars introduced yet another dimension in the neoconservative spectrum. In *The Public Interest*, those wars were fought mainly in the book review section. Here the journal found allies among liberals, in academia particularly, who were offended by the extravagances of the counter-cultural Left. The counter-culture, for its part, moved steadily toward an aggressive secularism and an animus against religion, foreshadowing an ominous tension between the secular and the religious in American politics. Here, too, *The Public Interest* found itself on firm ground. It had always had a benign interest in religion—a secular interest in religion, one might say, deriving from traditional political and moral philosophy, which has been appreciative of religion as a social as well as a spiritual force.

Yet *The Public Interest*, it should be said, transcended any political ideology, or even any political "disposition." Inevitably, to be sure, my own political identity spilled over into the public perception of the magazine; there was no way I could erect what on Wall Street is known as a "Chinese wall" between my writings in other journals and

this perception. But for many of its contributors and readers, and, not least, for its co-editors—first Dan Bell and then Nat Glazer—*The Public Interest* continued to have a non-ideological cast, in part because it continued to be focused largely on social research and social problems, and because it did so in a serious scholarly fashion. For these reasons and, I believe, because of its intellectual quality, it has been well received in a dominantly liberal academia, as well as in the media and in government circles. It has even, I venture to suggest, had an influence in shaping and reshaping the prevailing modes of discourse in the social sciences.

THE past 40 years, for its editors and contributors—as well as, I hope, for its readers—have been an exciting intellectual adventure. And there will be, no doubt, exciting times ahead for our successors as they cope with the extraordinary dilemmas posed by our new “brave new world.” We can leave no better legacy for them than the spirit of good will and high spirits that has sustained us in that adventure.